



# The Faith of a Non-Subscribing Presbyterian

*by*

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAME

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In order to understand the term "Non-Subscribing Presbyterian", we must go back a little in history. Like so many names and titles, this particular name has a curious sound to-day, and may sometimes even mislead people. But in the time when it arose it had a very definite meaning, and there was an excellent reason for the name. Let us take the words separately, and see just how they came to be what they are.

(a) **Presbyterian.** Our Churches are Presbyterian Churches. Presbyterianism came to Ireland in the year 1642, when the first Presbytery met at Carrickfergus in June of that year. That early Presbyterianism grew and spread. It was a very free form of religion: there were no hard and fast beliefs that everyone must accept; there were no creeds that members were forced to believe. Indeed, many of the earliest Presbyterian ministers who brought Presbyterianism into Ireland from Scotland and England were men who had themselves experienced persecution for their faith. They were hardly likely to impose on their converts fetters and hardships they themselves were escaping from. For nearly a century Irish Presbyterianism was "free". Its only rule of faith was the Bible; its chief desire was to have a worship that was simple and honest and sincere.

(b) **Non-Subscribing.** But about the year 1700 there were certain ministers who began to raise the question of "subscription". There had been drawn up in London (many years before) a very long statement known as the



Westminster Confession of Faith. This laid down what Presbyterians were supposed to believe. But there were some things in it that cannot be found in the Bible, and certainly many things that our Lord Jesus Christ never taught. Irish Presbyterians had up till then refused to be tied by anything more than the Bible, as we have seen. But now, about 1700, certain ministers, thinking to safeguard truth by writing everything down in black and white, began to demand that Irish Presbyterians, like their English and Scottish brethren, should sign or "subscribe" the Westminster Confession of Faith. To sign or subscribe it ("subscribe" means to under-write, or write your name under), was intended to show that you approved all that was in it, and that you too were willing to be bound by all the beliefs that it laid down. So some ministers began to urge subscription. But others among the Irish Presbyterians were opposed to this suggestion. They pointed out that Irish Presbyterianism had up till now been a "free" faith, content to accept the Bible only as its guide. They did not like this new notion of some men's saying what others must believe. The two parties went on contending, until by 1726 those who refused to sign or subscribe were forced out of the main body of the Irish Presbyterian Church, and, being thus cast out, formed themselves into a separate Church. Because they refused to subscribe, they became known as "Non-Subscribers", and although they did not choose this name it clung to them, and it did represent something very real and important about them.

We to-day are the descendants of those early Non-Subscribers. We do not think exactly as they did on all matters. Many of the things they believed we no longer believe. And some of the things we believe to-day they had never heard of. But all that is just as it should be. For truth is a growing thing, and God is always revealing new things to those who are humble and sincere and patient and willing to learn. If our Non-Subscribing forefathers were here among us to-day, they would not themselves believe just as they believed in 1700. They, too, would have moved forward to new truth and later ideas.



## WHAT NON-SUBSCRIBING PRESBYTERIANS BELIEVE

But now we must turn to ask what it is that Non-Subscribing Presbyterians to-day do believe; what are the principles that the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church stands for.

I must make it plain that we still are *Non-Subscribing* Presbyterians. That is to say, we still refuse to accept man-made creeds, still hold it wrong for anyone to dictate what another shall believe. So that there are no compulsory doctrines in the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, no confession of faith that all must subscribe. But, though Non-Subscribing Presbyterians are thus free, there are certain great truths that they all do accept, great principles that all believe. Some may state them in one way, some in another. How I write them down here will be my own way of stating them. But, broadly speaking, these things that follow are generally accepted and believed by Non-Subscribing Presbyterians.

**(1) Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe in God.** They believe that God is all-wise, all-holy, all-good, and all-loving, more wise and holy and good and loving than the best of us can possibly imagine. And Non-Subscribing Presbyterians will not believe anything about God that makes Him anything else than wise and holy, good and loving. Sometimes people have believed very terrible things about God. They have believed that He was a very angry and vengeful God, who brought fearful punishments upon people for wrong-doing. Some have even taught that He made a great flaming hell somewhere, in which people who do wrong, or who do not believe certain exact things about God or Jesus Christ, would be cast, to suffer endless torment and anguish. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not believe that. They are sure that Jesus Christ did not believe it. In his Parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance (Luke 15 : 11-32), he taught that God is far more merciful and kind than the best of us, and only too willing to forgive



us and take us back into His friendship the moment we turn to Him and want to be good. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians believe that God, the great and loving Father, made the world and all the beautiful and marvellous things that are in it. They believe that God loves us all, and wants nothing more of us than that we should be kind and good and brotherly, and find our happiness in doing His will and helping each other.

(2) **Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe in Jesus Christ.** They look up to him and reverence him as their great Leader, the gracious and beautiful person who has taught men more about God and His ways than anyone else who ever lived. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not believe that Jesus was himself God. Many Christians do believe that; but Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not. They do not think the Bible teaches that; they do not think Jesus himself taught it. Jesus taught that God is one, and there is no other beside Him (Mark 10 : 18 ; Mark 12 : 29). "My Father and your Father, my God and your God", he said (John 20 : 17). Christians in many churches, however, believe that Jesus was God. They think that there are three people or persons (a Trinity) who together make up God, so to speak, and that Jesus is one of these three persons. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians respect all sincere beliefs, even when they cannot agree with them; they think each man must think out his beliefs for himself, by earnest study of the Bible, by prayer, and by seeking always for the truth. But they do not themselves share that belief that God is three persons. (That is why they are sometimes called "Unitarians", though this name, too, is not of their own choosing. Unitarians believe that God is one.) How, then, are we to think of Jesus Christ? Non-Subscribing Presbyterians prefer here, as in all else, to keep close to the words of the Bible. Thus, they think of Jesus Christ as St. Peter thought of him: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him" (Acts 2 : 22); that "God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power", and that he "went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed, for God



was with him" (Acts 10 : 38). They think again with St. Paul : "Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness" (Romans 1 : 4). Especially, I think, they like to think of him as St. John thought of him, as God's own Thought or Word taking shape in human form and a human life, God's great and beautiful purpose made flesh (John 1 : 14). In such ways Non-Subscribing Presbyterians think of Jesus Christ. They see in him a life full of God, perfectly devoted to God's perfect will. Gratefully they love and reverence and adore him, and they learn from him more than from anyone else what God is like. They believe the noblest aim any one of us can have is to try to be like him.

**(3) Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe in the Bible.** They know the Bible is not really a single book, but a whole collection of books that were written during more than a thousand years of Jewish history, and that these books contain many different points of view about God and life and human character and duty. In the pages of the Bible they see how men's thoughts of God grew and developed. At first some of their notions were crude and even terrible. They thought some things of God that you and I would certainly not think. But through the centuries great prophets and teachers arose and taught men nobler and truer ideas. And in the end there came our Lord Jesus Christ, who brought to men the most beautiful and joyous ideas of God that ever were thought. Thus Non-Subscribing Presbyterians recognise that the Bible is not equal. It is of equal interest, but it is not all equally valuable, so to speak. We have to try to see it as a whole, and to realise that the truth its pages contain is a growing truth. As Jesus himself said : "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time . . . but I say unto you . . ." (Matt. 5 : 21). Non-Subscribing Presbyterians value the Bible and reverence it greatly ; it is the most beautiful book in the world ; but above all it is the book that tells us about Jesus Christ, the matchless beauty of his life, the splendour and power of his teaching, and the greatness and charity of his



death. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians find in the Bible their great guide to life and faith.

**(4) Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe in Salvation.**

They believe that men are saved as they come to live their life in friendship with God, and to look for happiness in doing God's will. They do not think that being saved is just a matter of what men think or believe. Much more it is a matter of how men live. Jesus taught that men were saved as they became like God. "Inasmuch as ye did it . . ." he said (Matthew 25 : 40). "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, but he that doeth the will of my Father in heaven", he told men (Matthew 7 : 21). Non-Subscribing Presbyterians believe that being saved is becoming more and more Christlike, day by day and year by year, being more kind and brave, more forgiving and helpful, more humble and sincere. Some Christians believe differently about salvation. They believe that long ago God became very angry with all the people He had made, and would consent to forgive them and take them back into His friendship only if Jesus Christ died upon the cross and took that as a punishment in the place of wrong-doing men. Being saved, they think, means believing that, and being willing to accept the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ as a substitute for their own sins, and feeling sure that God has forgiven them because of that perfect offering. Now, as I have said earlier, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians respect all sincere beliefs, but they are sure that this is a mistaken idea. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not believe that this idea of blood atonement, as it is called, is the best way to think of God and His dealings with men, nor do they believe that our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught it. They think being saved is a matter of character, of following more and more truly the example of Jesus, and of being ever more obedient to the Holy Spirit of God that dwells in each human life. They believe salvation is open to all who will try this way, that God loves everyone that He has made. And that kind of salvation they very much desire for themselves, and indeed for all men.

**(5) Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe that men never die.** Of course, their bodies die. We know that well



enough, and some of us have seen their dead bodies buried in graves, with those they loved standing reverently around. But Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not believe that the real man dies. They are sure that man is much more than a body. He is a soul or spirit, and spirit is immortal. The spirit or soul lives on after the body dies, and the real man goes on growing and learning, doing better and better the gracious and perfect will of God. Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not pretend to know much about what that after-life is like. The Bible does not say much about it, and even Jesus Christ did not try to explain what it might be like. We know that when people die they are still in God's love and care, and are happy in His keeping; that they are with those they love who also have died, and that the immortal life is a life where people go on growing and learning. For the rest, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians are content to wait until they themselves die and pass on to that other life, to discover exactly what it is like. As we have seen, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians do not believe in a hell. For to believe that would be to have poor and unworthy ideas of God, to make Him very different from the loving Father and kindly Friend that Jesus spoke about. Perhaps that other life is very much like a school, where some are in higher classes, and others, who have not learned so well the lessons of life, are in lower classes. Jesus did say that there were "many mansions" there (John 14: 2). So perhaps not everyone goes to exactly the same place, or lives exactly the same kind of life. But that is a very different thing from believing in a hell. There, in that other life, we shall go on growing and learning, rising above our earthly mistakes and wrong-doing, becoming ever wiser and purer and stronger, more truly sons and daughters of God.

**(6) Non-Subscribing Presbyterians Believe in the Church.** It is natural that when people share certain beliefs, and wish to live a certain kind of life, they should come together to express their thoughts and desires. Also men learn more in fellowship than they do singly and in isolation. No one can rise to be his best by keeping to himself alone. Moreover, by being a member of the



Christian Church, one shares in all the rich heritage of thought and experience of those who have lived before, who have left us an example to follow or have written down great thoughts that live on through the centuries. The Christian Church is a fellowship of people — men and women, boys and girls — who believe in God, who love and reverence our Lord Jesus Christ, and who come together from time to time to thank God for His goodness and to remind themselves of things they must do, and the kind of life they must live, in order to do the will of God, and to find their happiness in His fellowship. The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church is a part of the worldwide Christian Church. As we have seen, it is a free Church. It does not lay down any creed or system of beliefs that people must accept before they can join it. It does not ask its members to subscribe the Westminster Confession or any other statement of belief. Its ministers and its ordinary members alike are free to think about God and about life for themselves, and no one has the right to say in detail just what they must believe. But the men and women who belong to the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church believe in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the kind of things I have written about earlier. It is those beliefs that unite them, and make them into a religious fellowship in which all find a greater strength for good living, and where all come together in worship to thank God for His goodness and to pray for themselves and for others.

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## THE NON-SUBSCRIBING PRESBYTERIAN FAITH

Now I have almost finished. I have told you something of the way in which the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church got its name, and the more important things that Non-Subscribing Presbyterians believe. Since in the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church all members are free, and there are no compulsory things about which all must



believe exactly alike, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians have no official creed. But perhaps we could sum up the kind of things that they do believe in some such statement as the following. You will notice that most of the words in this statement are taken straight from the Bible. That is just as it should be ; for, as I have said, the Bible is the rule of faith and guidance for those who belong to the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, the high and holy One who inhabiteth eternity.

God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

God is Light. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and with Him.

God is Love, and everyone that loveth is born of God. He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen.

We believe in Jesus Christ, the first-born among many brethren, revealer of the mind and purpose of God,

Who for our sake bore shame and suffering and the Cross, but rose victorious over death, and is alive for evermore ;

Who is our Leader, our Brother, and our great Example ;

Who taught us to love and forgive each other, and to live to build the Kingdom of God upon earth.

We believe in the Holy Spirit of God, that dwells in human minds and inspires human hearts ;



In the fellowship of praise and prayer and worship ;

In the community of the Church, and in the unbroken communion of the saints both living and dead ;

In the forgiveness of sins, and the continual renewal of those who turn in faith to God.

This world is transitory and passeth away, but God hath made man to be immortal, and he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

## CONCLUSION

The people for whom chiefly I have written this little book — the boys and girls of our Sunday Schools and the younger members of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland — are already members of that Church. I hope that what I have told them about it will make them glad to belong to it, and that they will try in their daily life to be worthy of it. In olden days our Non-Subscribing forefathers suffered very much to maintain the freedom of that faith that now we hold. They made great sacrifices, and suffered many things for its sake. Some of them even died rather than betray the faith. It is no cheap and easy thing that we have inherited.

We are no longer called upon to die for our faith. But we are called upon to live for it. It is a great and noble faith. And it requires great and noble men and women to represent it. We must try to be worthy of it, and by our words and actions uphold the honour and good name of our Non-Subscribing Presbyterian faith.



## NOTE ON BOOKS

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This little book tells about the beliefs of Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, and touches only very briefly on the long history of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church. That history has been told more fully in a little book written (mainly for young people) by the Revs. A. L. Agnew, O.B.E., B.A., D.D., J.P., and J. McCleery, B.A., S.T.M., entitled "The Story of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church". This is published by the Sunday School Committee, price 1/-.

Other little books that tell something of the history and beliefs of Non-Subscribing Presbyterians are :—

"Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland : Manual detailing its Origin and History". (This was published anonymously, but was written by the late Alexander Gordon, M.A.).

"A Short History of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland", by John Campbell, M.A., M.D., LL.D.

"The Story of Religion in Ireland", by Clement Pike.

Three larger books contain much useful material. These are :—

"Historic Memorials of the First Presbyterian Church of Belfast", by Alexander Gordon, M.A.

"History of the Second Congregation of Protestant Dissenters in Belfast", by S. Shannon Millin, B.A.

"The Life of the Rev. Henry Montgomery", by John A. Crozier, B.A.